EXHIBITION REVIEWS OF
CONTEMPORARY LATINO AND CHICANO ART:
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE OF AESTHETIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the forces and influences that informed my art writing in the development of four exhibition reviews about issues in contemporary Latino and Chicano art. The thesis investigates a process of art education that addresses social and aesthetic issues through the popular art press, and as a means of developing strategies for intercultural communication.

Chicano art has historically been integrally connected to a struggle for social justice based in resistance to cultural domination. This is due to a history of colonial oppression that relegated Chicanos to second-class status politically and economically. As a result, much early Chicano art was centered in addressing social issues. The marginalization and exclusion of Chicano artists from traditional exhibition venues necessitated the development of alternative exhibition spaces, which contributed to an increased visibility of certain artists' production. Nevertheless, the characterization of the work is often derived from dominant cultural ideologies informed by modernist notions of universal aesthetic quality, or conversely from sentiments and ideas based in Chicano nationalism. The struggle for how the work will be represented and characterized thus becomes central in avoiding simplistic analysis that contributes to its
continued marginalization as separate and unequal. Theory and criticism in this context becomes an important vehicle for educating the public to the complexity and significance of the work of Chicano and Latino artists. Art criticism can function politically as a tool for defining the parameters and issues that constitute the value of cultural production in a struggle for self-definition. In identifying issues and ideas, this thesis advocates an alternative approach to assessing contemporary Chicano cultural practices. In so doing, the reviews contribute to the development of agendas and strategies for social transformation based in intercultural communication.
Dedicated to Verna and Hugh Brady
for their unwavering faith and support,
without which this project would not be possible.
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3. "Linkage: Generation/Relation at the San Jose Center for Latino

4. "Helpless: Gilles Peress and George Legrady at New Langton Arts."


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Art Education
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CHAPTER 1

SOCIAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT
OF AN ART WRITER

This Masters Thesis investigates four exhibition reviews I have
written as a means of art education and social critique. I will explicate,
through personal narrative, my involvement as a curator and arts writer,
in particular the factors that conditioned the critical practices evident in the
exhibition reviews.

- "Linkage: Generation/Relation at San Jose Center for Latino Arts."  

- "Thesis/Antithesis: Enrique Chagoya at the M. H. de Young Museum."  
  *Artweek*, vol. 25, no. 20, October 20, 1994, p. 15.

- "Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings at Center for the Arts."  

- "Patssi Valdez at the San Jose Museum of Art."  

In these reviews I will identify issues that form the basis for
discussion of contemporary Latino and Chicano art. The aim is to address
how critical discourse in the reviews functions to counter romantic and
mystified accounts of Latino and Chicano art.

The issues that appear in the reviews are supplemented and
contextualized through literary sources. In many cases, my curatorial
experience and interpretive visual analysis formed the basis for the ideas articulated. The reviews were also conditioned by my undergraduate interest in the political economy of Latin America. The knowledge of Latin American societies as socially diverse logically led to addressing cultural phenomena as equally varied. Additionally, in January of 1993 as an Arts Midwest Fellow, I organized a symposium on contemporary issues in Latin American art for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. The experience of organizing the symposium, titled *Diverse Legacies: The Issue of Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin American Art*, developed and solidified notions that artistic practices reflected diverse social histories.

In organizing the symposium, emphasis was placed on particular issues and topics. This was done to counter crass characterizations of diverse work as solely based on national origins and geographical location. The topics addressed in the symposium are significant because they illustrate a particular logic and orientation evident in the reviews.

The proposed symposium will focus on cultural identity in light of the diverse social histories reflected in Latin American art through a discussion of the varied social histories which inform and shape aesthetic ideas and practice.

*Keynote Address: Complex Identities, Toward a Definition of Contemporary Latin American Art*

This session will address the complex character of contemporary Latin American art through a discussion of the varied social histories which inform and shape aesthetic ideas and practice.

*African Presence, Affirmation, and Resistance in Latin America*

This session will explore the influence of an African heritage on artistic practice in light of social and regional specifics. A special emphasis will be placed on the interpenetration of cultural influences and syncretism in articulating personal and social identity.
Representing Issues of Gender and Sexual Orientation in Contemporary Latin American Art
This session will investigate modes of characterization and self-definition in articulating issues of empowerment and affirmation related to gender and sexual orientation. Emphasis will be placed on redefining perceptions of identity.

Race, Class, and Identity: Art as a Form of Political Struggle
This session will focus on ways artistic practice serves as a means of articulating artists’ identities as a vehicle of social transformation. Particular emphasis will be placed on the ways in which artists use various sources and means of expression to critique dominant ideologies and as social opposition.

Self Portraiture as an Articulation of Identity
This session will focus on self portraiture as a reflection of personal identity. Emphasis will be placed on personal iconography as a manifestation of personal, social, psychological, and artistic concerns.

Border Dialogues: The Hybridization of Cultural Identity
This session will address the contradictions and inherent difficulties in defining cultural identity in ever-changing transcultural environments.

National Traditions, Identity, and International Integration
This session will focus on ways in which artists utilize national artistic traditions to articulate self-affirmation and identity, as well as how artists appropriate and integrate diverse cultural traditions to contribute to a world dialogue and reservoir of aesthetic ideas.¹

The symposium’s organizational strategy embraced a range of artistic practices under identifiable topic and subject areas. The structure connected artistic practices by Latino and Chicano artists to dialogues within contemporary art as a whole.

Similarly, many of the exhibitions that I will discuss in this thesis can be viewed as microcosms of social and aesthetic issues that form the parameters of current dialogues in contemporary art. Issues identified in the reviews constitute the central portion of the thesis. In addition, there is an underlying logic evident in the reviews presented. This structure was further informed by my interest in artists who are consciously engaged in political work or work involving political issues.

The ideas that appear in the four exhibition reviews are informed by general areas of interest which condition my approach to writing art criticism.

1. I have been interested in critical analysis of current theories of Chicano art as a basis for critiquing pluralism and multiculturalism as manifestations of social "othering." I have also looked at ways in which aesthetic practices aimed at resistance and inclusion are paradoxically inverted into a basis for aesthetic constraint and "self-othering."

2. I am also interested in ways in which contemporary artists utilize diverse popular and folk art traditions and techniques as oppositional aesthetic and social strategies. In this connection, I am concerned with investigating the historically poly-syncretic nature of artistic practices. I am also interested in the ways that artists utilize, intervene in, and contribute to an international reservoir of aesthetic ideas and dialogues.

3. I am interested in developing an integrated approach to art education. This approach is based on a critical and interpretive evaluation of cross-cultural art practices as a means for intercultural communication between diverse artists and audiences.
In the context of my development as an art writer, the purpose of this thesis is to outline social and aesthetic issues that exist in the critical writing presented.

1. The reviews defend and allude to the value of culturally specific exhibition spaces as a means of self-representation. Likewise, these spaces provide a forum for cultural products not wholly informed by Euro-American institutional standards of quality and values.

2. The reviews examine the potential of identity politics and nationalist sentiment to legitimate Euro-Amercicentric characterizations of Latino art as exotic. This legitimation process is seen as aiding the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the co-optation and inversion of aesthetic practices that aim to challenge the hegemony and authority of mainstream art institutions.

3. The reviews identify and problematize the diversity and complexity of Latino and Chicano art, in an effort to combat homogenizing and simplistic views by which Latino artists have been "othered" and "self-othered."

4. The reviews declare the social and cultural hybridity and syncretic nature of Latino and Chicano artistic practices. The identification of a complex range of artistic practices becomes a means of challenging the schismization of Latino and non-Latino art. This simplistic division along nationalist lines marginalizes certain art and militates against a more complex understanding of the work and its potential for cross-cultural communication.

5. The reviews aim to connect Chicano artistic practices to contemporary art as a whole. The formal hybridity of the work is seen as a means of
developing intercultural communication in an inclusive and expanded redefinition of "American" art.

6. The reviews also comment on the iconographic significance and ideological nature of images. Additionally, in this thesis I aim to shed light on Chicano aesthetic production and my own critical writing process through an examination of four reviews, and contribute to a dialogue that is concerned with providing an assessment of contemporary aesthetic theory as it relates to Chicano art practice. In so doing, the study aims to comment on issues that challenge a Eurocentric view of art and culture in contemporary society. Likewise, it investigates how artists and the exhibitions in the reviews engage social issues through aesthetic strategies. The investigation problematizes specific artistic practices that do not easily fit into simple categories of "mainstream" or culturally specific. Finally, the criticism in the reviews is meant to establish certain socially motivated art as both drawing on and reacting against a Modernist art historical tradition, as well as appropriating and contributing to a reservoir of aesthetic and social ideas.

The logic behind the narrative approach utilized in this study is to unify social context and personal experience, or the public and the private as total lived experience. I am the product of a single parent family, raised by my mother in and around the Los Angeles area in largely Chicano barrios. In this environment, the two areas that managed to keep my

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constant interests were art and history. I attribute this on the one hand to a lack of resources which made me turn to expressing myself with whatever materials were available, such as crayons, watercolors, pens, paper, et cetera. These underlying concerns are also connected to a need to understand my social existence and the world around me through history.

In time, art and history increasingly became the two major areas of interest in my life. These concerns initially manifested themselves in radio and television production and stage set design in high school. On entering college, I pursued art with an emphasis in ceramics and Chicano history. My interest in Chicano history evolved into a serious social analysis that led to an exploration of the political economy of capitalism as the basis for racial oppression and social alienation. I synthesized these interests in an individual major at the University of California at Santa Cruz in Visual Political Theory, which was concerned with capitalist development in Europe and the concurrent capitalist penetration in Latin America. These ideas became the basis for an analysis of “dialectical film form” in the theories of Sergei Eisenstein and revolutionary Cuban cinema, which led to my first Bachelor of Arts degree.

After time off from school, I returned to U.C. Santa Cruz to pursue a second degree in Art History. I viewed this course of study primarily as a means to investigate social and cultural issues via an analysis of art objects as microcosms of historical epochs. I began to look at ways in which current artistic practices, ideologies, and hierarchalization of the arts, in both media and genre, extended back to the Renaissance, and how Renaissance ideas were influenced and made possible by previous events and ideas rooted in the Middle Ages. I was interested in identifying
various ways artists appropriate, incorporate, and extend diverse historical and cultural traditions in their work. I was also interested in how artists utilize artistic means and modes of expression to invert and undermine dominant class ideologies. Further, I looked at the impact of industrialization, and particularly photography, on the development of various trends and movements identified as Modern.

Though I originally planned to pursue a career teaching art history, in the process I became Assistant Director of the Eloise Pickard Smith Gallery at U.C. Santa Cruz. It was in this capacity that I realized I could influence audiences on a range of issues through the arts by developing and implementing a curatorial program that would address media and social issues often excluded from mainstream exhibition programs.

Upon completion of my degree in art history, I secured a position as Executive Director of a non-profit art organization in San Jose, California. As Director of the San Jose Art League Downtown Gallery, my agenda was to transform what had been a locally oriented membership organization into a first-rate art forum. Under my direction, the Gallery presented a broad program of social and aesthetic issues aimed at serving the cross-cultural community in which we operated. As Director, I organized exhibitions that addressed concerns of limited inclusion of certain media, artists, and issues in the arts. I also developed a program that allowed me to work with a variety of world-class arts professionals.

Subsequently, I worked as Traveling Exhibitions Coordinator for a Mexican museum in San Francisco. There, my focus was on developing a strategy for integrating and infusing the richness and diversity of Mexican and Chicano art into an expanded definition of American art, as a means
for cross-cultural communication between diverse audiences. This was done to educate the museum-going public about Mexican visual expression that ranged from ancient to contemporary, decorative to functional, and traditional to experimental. However, I became disillusioned with what I perceived as a romantic and mystifying issue orientation at that museum and among certain Chicano artists and curators.

I relocated to the Midwest, and was awarded an Arts Midwest Minority Arts Administration Fellowship. This program is concerned with offsetting the underrepresentation of people of color in the arts while extending the professional development of arts administrators. As a Fellow, I became increasingly aware that I wanted to further my theoretical development concerning a variety of issues. In addition, it became clear that so long as I lacked a terminal degree, I would continue to confront a professional glass ceiling that would not allow me to extend and implement my aesthetic and social strategies.

Following my tenure as an Arts Midwest Fellow, I returned to California where I worked as an independent curator and exhibition consultant. I also became a writer for Artweek, a monthly publication of critical writing and reviews of exhibitions in the western United States. In this context, I pursued art criticism as a strategy for offsetting the lack of an advanced degree by gaining recognition through publication. Writing for publication also provided an opportunity to engage in aesthetic dialogues in a public forum. I was initially interested in addressing issues related to contemporary Chicano art. I felt that some of the issues that I was prepared to raise through critical analysis would not otherwise be addressed. This was due to the limited number of Chicano writers and the fact that a non-
Chicano writer might not feel comfortable or familiar enough with the issues to confidently pose hard critical questions. It is at this juncture between my subjective social and aesthetic interests, and the cultural landscape in which I found myself, that I felt compelled to engage social issues through aesthetic critical discourse. The narrative approach in this thesis thus provides insight into the actual process of identifying, developing, and explicating the sources and strategies behind the particular art criticism discussed in the thesis project.\textsuperscript{4}

The thesis components that make up this project constitute a multi-level presentation that incorporates a contextual overview, and includes the subjects and issues in the reviewed exhibitions, literary sources that informed the ideas apparent in the thesis and reviews, and the integrated texts of the exhibition reviews.

The significance of this thesis project is to contribute to an understanding of one approach to art education as a strategy for social transformation through critical discourse in the popular art press. The critical writing practice evident in this thesis is based in an analysis of individual artistic practices by Latino and Chicano artists in specific contexts. The writing thus serves as the basis for confronting simplistic notions of the political in art, formally and intellectually, and how art and art criticism can function as a form of political practice.

In the thesis text that follows, Chapter 2 discusses the background and context for the issues discussed in the exhibition reviews. Chapter 3

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ibid.}
discusses the ideas and educational strategy utilized in the four
exhibition reviews. Chapter 4 summarizes the issues and concludes the
thesis with observations concerning intercultural communication as a
vehicle for social transformation.
CHAPTER 2

APPROACHING THE GALLERY: SOCIAL AND AESTHETIC CONTEXT

This chapter examines some of the issues and ideas that appear in the selected reviews. To a large degree, many of these concepts are conditioned by issues that have been raised since the 1960s and 1970s. During those decades, there arose a proliferation of ideas challenging the Eurocentric nature of art and culture in contemporary society. Some of the issues reflect a widespread revisionist project related to counter-discourses that impacted academia—cultural studies, women's studies, Chicano studies, African American studies, gender studies, and ethnic studies—demanding greater recognition and legitimacy. Critical discourses often referred to under the nebulous umbrella of postmodernism resulted from several contemporary processes. These processes sprang from the creation of a greater space for dissident discourse in the international arena through anti-colonial struggle, the protest and influence of ethnic groups from the margins in U.S. cities, and increased information and improved facilities in travel and communication that provided greater opportunities for

cultural intervention by artists who were previously completely marginalized.6

Additionally, the process of confronting Eurocentric ideals and definitions was aided by the incorporation of photography and images from mass culture, Feminist deconstruction, and the development of alternative and culturally specific exhibition spaces, all of which contributed to the development of distinct formal and iconographic vocabularies. A questioning of a Eurocentric artistic canon fostered a more relativist approach to traditional academic standards of artistic quality. Some advances were made regarding a more inclusive redefinition of American art. However, for the most part, artists and artistic practices with a social agenda have remained marginalized and peripheral to mainstream institutions and audiences.7

To the degree that there has been a Postmodern interest in the ethnic alterity of various forms of culturally specific artistic production, much of that interest is informed by a Modernist hegemonic aesthetic that replicates and continues to contribute to vulgar notions of the artistic production of particular artists as exotic and "othered." To a large extent, the focus on plurality, or in this case multiculturalism in a Postmodern context, is often centered on a paradigm of diversity that privileges "difference" as if it were

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necessarily a critical category. Monica Amor states an idea initially posed by Luise Marcial-Lacoste,

To say of an environment that it is pluralist, or of a politics that it recognizes plurality, is to say nothing about the nature of the elements, relations, and issues that constitute it as a totality.\(^8\)

Often the focus on "plurality" functions as a means of delimiting and neutralizing the specificity and tasks of art that questions, reformulates, confronts, and addresses the political and economic realities that define the current situation. Lowery Stokes Sims observed,

The truth of the matter is that artists of color are not marginal in American or world culture. They are in fact the norm and have contributed to our definition of that norm. That they have and continue to be marginalized is the effect of a persistent colonial attitude in the art world and in an American culture at large that is traumatized by any challenge to its cherished image as white, preferably male, blond, and Christian. This is the emblem that affords some privilege in the world; thus marginalizing "the other" is not only based on some deeply rooted elements of self-deception in the American character but also on the need to maintain the power structure that supports this deception.\(^9\)

Indeed, binary opposition that emphasizes "diversity" fails to accurately account for the development of specific artistic practices that defy simplistic categorization into "mainstream" or "culturally specific." Such simplistic definitions privilege and substantiate Eurocentric ideologies that venerale Modernist standards of "quality" or denigrate politically engaged works as aesthetically "othered," separate and unequal. This myopic

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approach to diverse artistic practices continues to limit and confine critical artistic discourse to the one subject that is permitted for it, namely "cultural identity."\textsuperscript{10}

A critical issue, therefore, is who articulates identity for various groups? Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin noted,

Representation and resistance are very broad arenas within which much of the drama of colonialist relations and post-colonial examination and subversion of those relations has taken place. In both conquest and colonization, texts and sexuality played a major part. European texts—anthropologies, histories, fiction, captured the non-European subject within European frameworks which read his or her alterity as terror or lack. . . . And it is through education and in terms of modes of production and consumption that colonialist representations persist and circulate.\textsuperscript{11}

Indeed, often the most powerful agents in the articulation of identity through the construction of exhibitions are neither the artists, cultural groups represented, or audiences, but North American exhibition curators who set out to construct specific narratives to define Latin American art.\textsuperscript{12} Such a curatorial approach is the legacy of a Euro-American cultural practice that has historically employed a unilinear concept of "enlightened progress" that is based in colonialism. Mari Carmen Ramirez states,

The absorption and domination of less materially developed cultures, i.e., "others," led in turn to the vast reservoir of "primitive," "exotic" sources that since the early part of the twentieth century has resulted in an alternate project of modernity, based on the irrational, the primitive, and the unconscious. Curatorial practices based on this perspective,


therefore are not capable of viewing the arts of non-First World societies without the ethnographical lens that results from colonialism, but also tend to divest these manifestations of the complexity of their origins and development. These practices invariably replicate the us/them perspective whereby the achievements of the colonized subjects are brought up for objective scrutiny to determine their degree of rationality or authenticity, thereby reducing them to derivative manifestations or variations of already existing tendencies.13

Such a cultural paradigm privileges a view of history as enlightened progress, and is part and parcel of European thought. The idea of enlightened progress ran parallel with the rise of modern colonialism. Colonialist expansion, in its "othering" and violent annexations of the non-Western world, used the idea of history as an instrument of control over subject peoples. The myth of a value-free, "scientific" view of history, albeit universalized as the continuity of events, was used to authorize and legitimize the hegemonic construction of a world reality14 that informs and conditions a hierarchal and often exclusionist Eurocentric view of art. The assumption of a transcendent value of "quality" in art as universally recognized truth has functioned in the cultural sphere as a fundamental feature for the construction of institutional bases of power in the arts. This situation conditions the discourses evident in the exhibition reviews, which are informed by a history of double colonialism (the Spanish in Mexico and the U.S. annexation of Mexico). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin stated,

The assumption of universalism is a fundamental feature of the construction of colonial power, in that it provides the terms and the structures by which individuals have a world,
a method by which the 'real' is determined, notions of universality can, like the language which suggest them, become imperialistic. The language itself implies certain assumptions about the world, a certain history, a certain way of seeing.\textsuperscript{15}

This passage addresses a critical area in the reviews that follow. Each of the selected reviews was formed by my need and desire to engage in social struggle through cultural resistance via art criticism. The general aim, at the time that I wrote the reviews, was to undermine the authority of dominant cultural constructions. This was done through the contestation of narrow definitions that characterize Latino and Chicano art, and by addressing a romantic nationalist ideology that conditioned the early concerns of Chicano art based in self-representation. I felt it was important as a Chicano to contextualize the work of politically motivated artists who are and have been underrecognized within the dominant tradition of aesthetic strategies and dialogues. This approach was aimed at opposing the hierarchalization of art and exclusionary academic standards of excellence that in many cases have been used to define these artists, issues, parameters, field of operation, production and consumption. Such exclusionary evaluations are examined for their potential for continued exoticization and co-optation.

I believe it is important to establish countercultural practice as both drawing on and reacting against a range of aesthetic sources, to counter various tendencies that would "other" particular types of symbolic representation.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, "Universality and Difference," p. 55.
The foregoing ideas are presented to contextualize the thesis. Some of the broader issues raised above will be further delineated in the following chapter. My intent is to connect aesthetic and social issues and artistic practices centered in race, class, and gender through an evaluation of the exhibition reviews. This is done as a means of addressing an area of critical discourse that is largely overlooked as providing a key to assess Latino and Chicano art, the specificity of individual artistic practices and formal strategies. The point is that artists continue to be "othered" and excluded as culturally specific, because their work is not considered "original" or "authentic," and therefore viewed as derivative. Likewise, politically motivated art, which is seen as uninformed by established bourgeois ideological standards of quality or excellence, should be viewed as the products of diverse social beings in specific contexts, with specific personal histories, who utilize diverse formal strategies to articulate social concerns. The goal in the reviews was therefore to advance a position that advocates and investigates the specific forces and relations of artistic production and consumption that inform the work. These forces and relations occur in the complex dialectics among institutions, artists and their audiences. The cultural dialectics are viewed as a nexus by which to establish and legitimize artistic practices and ideas as aesthetically and politically viable and socially significant.
CHAPTER 3

THE EXHIBITION REVIEWS

In July of 1993, I completed an Arts Midwest Fellowship and returned to California to seek employment as an arts professional. During this period, I contacted Artweek and offered to review an exhibition of contemporary Chicano artists at a Latino exhibition space in San Jose.

Prior to moving to the Midwest in 1992, I had been approached to write for Artweek. The editors wanted to diversify their staff of contributing writers, and were particularly looking for writers who could review Latino and Chicano art. While I was interested in writing, at that time circumstances necessitated that I relocate to the Midwest to extend my arts administrative experience. Upon returning to California, I began to work primarily as an independent curator and freelance arts administrator. I also realized that I could use art criticism as a vehicle for addressing social issues. I approached Artweek and offered to review an exhibition titled Generation/Relation at the San Jose Center for Latino Art and Culture.
"Linkage: Generation/Relation at San Jose Center for Latino Arts"

I offered to review *Generation/Relation* because, though the artists in the exhibition were relatively unknown, I felt that the work did not employ stereotypically identifiable iconography. Thus, the art did not fit into a category easily identifiable as "Latino" or "Chicano." I felt that the exhibition review provided an opportunity to raise issues that would address and perhaps problematize overly simplistic notions of Latino art. My general purpose was to use the review to educate readers of *Artweek* about the significance of culturally specific exhibition spaces, and to address issues that I felt were raised in the exhibition. Therefore, I began the review with the general observation that *Generation/Relation* served as a microcosm of a range of socio-historical and aesthetic issues embodied in the development of culturally specific exhibition spaces, as well as issues of self representation by and for the "communities" these institutions claim to represent—however problematically.16

The statement refers to social and political struggle during the 1960s and 1970s that conditioned the development of alternative Latino exhibition spaces such as Galería de la Raza, San Francisco; Centro Cultural de la Raza, San Diego; and Mechicano Art Center, Los Angeles, as well as spaces like the Studio Museum in Harlem. The development of alternative spaces for Latino and Chicano art was historically necessary. As one artists has noted, circumstances necessitated an "alternative to the system

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16 Torres, "Linkage: Generation/Relation at San Jose Center for Latino Arts." *Artweek*, vol. 25, no. 13, July 7, 1994. All quotes in this section not otherwise referenced are taken from this article.
that existed at the time. Museums were not exhibiting Chicanos, galleries were not exhibiting Chicanos, so we felt that we needed to take our own destinies into our own hands.17 I was also interested in making reference to the problematic issue of self-representation of Latino and Chicano communities. I questioned the nature of the term "communities," which implies that communities can or should be somehow considered homogenous entities or unitary subjects. I also wanted to allude to the issue of who claims to speak for a particular group of people.

I considered the review a vehicle for educating an uninitiated audience to issues present in Latino art and the historical function of alternative exhibition spaces. I felt it necessary to address the curatorial intent of the exhibition in order to maintain the didactic character of the review. The curatorial intent was to link two generations of Latino artists to "explore the commonalities of artistic values, artistic practice, visual sensibilities and philosophies," and "to reflect on how much ground has been achieved" by Latino artists and art organizations.18 I thought it was important to connect Generation/Relation to a broader dialogue informed by issues related to cultural identity as a form of resistance through self-definition. Philip Brookman has noted,

Chicano artists redefined their traditions and produced a new world view that presented alternative mechanisms for affirming their history and experience. This meant throwing away the colonial past and creating new ideas to serve educational, political and aesthetic goals for their communities.19

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The creation of an iconography for establishing self-representation was an early strategy utilized by Chicano artists to combat denigrating stereotypes proliferated in the dominant culture. These early concerns with self-representation, aimed at combatting denigrating stereotypes, have contributed to a process by which certain artists are "othered," and in some cases "self-othered," through the maintenance of a particular iconographic vocabulary. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to defend the value of alternative cultural practices and exhibition spaces. Therefore stated,

Such institutions [i.e., culturally specific spaces] have historically provided marginalized artists with spaces to present their work, as integral counter-cultural strategies (both social and aesthetic) of self identification/definition. This phenomenon, and the concurrent development of alternative ideological, iconographic, and formal vocabularies, clearly contributed to the increased visibility of certain artists, and an interest in their "alterity," through a demand for a more relativist approach to formal standards of artistic "quality" and calls for an inclusive and expanded re-definition of "American" art.

I thought it crucial that the development of Chicano art, in all its diversity, be related to social struggles, as well as integrally informed by and connected to a range of aesthetic influences. Establishing the issue of conjuncture was critical as a way to avoid contributing to the perception of Chicano artists as separate from contemporary artists as a whole. Thus, I needed to make a clear connection between the development of a particular iconographic language that was alternately based on the aesthetic needs of artistic practice as self-affirmation and resistance, and the development of alternative spaces. The reference to "alterity" alluded to the "difference" and the potential for the exoticization of Latino artists as "othered" within the art world.
I wanted to address the critical issue that in spite of the curatorial intention to "explore the artistic commonalities and visual sensibilities between two generations of artists," it was important to move away from, or at least recognize, that this exhibition represented a digression from a historical tendency on the part of many Chicano scholars/curators to develop a constructed ideology based on romantic, historically suspect generalizations and unitary subject/categories concerning what constitutes Latino art and culture (i.e. Community, Family, traditional values, Latino artists, etc.).

This statement was particularly important because it called for the recognition of the diversity and complexity of artistic production by Chicano artists. It was intended to contradict a tendency to simplistically schismize culturally specific artistic production based on Eurocentric academic standards of excellence. This is not to deny that such an antithetical relationship has existed historically. Instead, I was concerned with stating that such binary opposition inhibited comprehending the complexity of the work. I alluded to the pitfalls of constructing an ideological narrative based on identifiable sources and iconography constructed by some early Chicano artists. The sources and iconography are usually identified as informed by a number of forces. These influences included the civil rights movement, the Cuban Revolution, labor/farmworker movement, student/youth movements of the 60s,\textsuperscript{21} almanaque (calendars which featured images from Mexican folklore),

religious images, altares (home religious shrines), and other sources in popular and folk culture. These sources formed a necessary means for articulating self pride through recognizable images, thus constituting a critical site of resistance.

The concept of self-definition is paramount to the discussion of Chicano art. To create art means to create one-self. Cultural representation is the manifestation of one's life or the illustration of a community bound by the symbols that delineate a group of beliefs. Definition of own culture is both a personal and a public action. It is personal since the input necessary to develop a sense of culture comes from private source, like family and indigenous traditions. Definitions become social when they are expressed through the act of creation, left open in the public for interpretation.

While postmodern interest in the "other" has opened up some space in high art circuits for the vernacular of non-Euro American cultures, it has introduced a new thirst for exoticism that rewards and conditions certain forms and paradigms from the periphery according to the desires of the mainstream. The articulation of self should not be burdened by a myth of cultural authenticity, that was itself received through and defined by colonialism.

In the review, I felt compelled to state that the exhibition's success was rooted in synthesizing contradictions that have been historically viewed by some scholars as diametrically opposed: "Latino art" and "academic/professional standards of excellence" (i.e., formal criteria, identified as the ideological aesthetic hegemony of the dominant culture, perceived as responsible for the exclusion and marginalization of artists of color).

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I felt equally obligated to make reference to the fact that this binary opposition between culturally specific artists and Eurocentrically derived standards of "quality" was artificially constructed, and was inconsistent with the work of many Latino artists. As counter evidence, I stated that, whether (consciously or unconsciously) this artificially constructed schism was diffused by the collaborative cross-cultural curatorial effort of Erin Goodwin-Guerrero (a self-proclaimed WASP/Gringa, and professor of art at San Jose State) and Pilar Agüero (a Latina artist). The curators intentionally selected noted Bay Area Latino artists who have achieved both academic and professional success, to nominate younger Latino artists for the exhibition itself.

This statement was meant to undermine misconceptions regarding the genesis and reality of contemporary Chicano art. In this misconception, Chicano art is perceived as a self-enclosed, counter cultural aesthetic that was necessarily anti-academic. This was the basis and the importance of identifying the curators, and furthermore served as the transitional mode for alluding to another critical issue, the cross-cultural aesthetic significance of the work. I was equally concerned with describing the complexity of the work as based in the cross-cultural infusion of sources and influences and a range of Chicano artistic expression. The exhibition displayed thematically and stylistically diverse efforts that extended the range of aesthetic possibilities found in the work of some of the mentor artists, based on the exhibiting artists' historically divergent personal and social points of reference. I made reference to a range of subjects and images evident in the work.

*Generation/Relation* presents works that exhibit a polysyncretic embodiment of a variety of stylistic issues and diverse cultural sources that recognize Fred Flintstone, Metal
magazine, atomic energy plants, red lace underwear, and Chiclets gum as just as integral to the Latino cultural experience as the Virgen de Guadalupe.

In this exhibition review, it was critical that I articulate a certain level of familiarity with Chicano art in order to engage issues I perceived in the exhibition. It was equally important to present a viable alternative to an all too often romantic nationalist ideology about Chicano identity, iconography, and artistic practices.

My concern was to discuss the works in the exhibition as microcosms embodying the particularities of the artists' aesthetic and social desires and experiences. In approaching the work in this way, I felt that I could discuss how some artists have been marginalized historically within a broader contemporary context. I concluded the review by stating,

in the pursuit of personal and social artistic concerns, the artists here have clearly identified ways of appropriating, incorporating and extending diverse traditions in their work, and they have utilized various modes of expression to invert and undermine both dominant class ideologies and internally imposed and prescribed culturally specific aesthetic agendas.

The statement was intended to establish a common ground between the artists in this particular exhibition and artists in general at the level of production. It is in artistic production that the articulation of thoughts and feelings in the transformation of materials through labor constitutes a point of conjuncture among contemporary artists. To establish that point theoretically, I felt it necessary to undercut tendencies of "othering," and in many cases the "self-othering" of Latino artists based in the exoticization of Latino art forms.
"Thesis/Antithesis: Enrique Chagoya at the M. H. de Young Museum"

In September of 1994, I was assigned by Artweek to review the work of Enrique Chagoya at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco. The nature of the artist's work offered a chance to engage overt political subject matter through the exhibition review. It was also my first opportunity to review an exhibition at a major museum. Given the context of the exhibition, it was important at the outset to strategically address two critical issues. First, work by artists with social agendas should be exhibited as an integral part of an expanded redefinition of "American" art. Second, mainstream institutions are socially obligated to recognize and exhibit the work of artists of color. I thought it important to state that this obligation does not necessarily form a significant threat to the power and authority of mainstream art institutions.25 In the opening sentence of the review, I stated,

That the work of Enrique Chagoya should arrive at the de Young Museum is indicative of how far some mainstream institutions have come in recognizing the diversity of contemporary American art, and testifies to the supreme confidence the keepers of culture have in subsuming critical or oppositional cultural manifestations.26

I continued by observing that Chagoya's work was 'rooted, after all, in the long trajectory of the encounter and clash of European and American social

26 Torres, "Thesis/Antithesis: Enrique Chagoya at the M. H. de Young Museum." Artweek, vol. 25, no. 20, October 20, 1994, p. 15. All quotes in this section not otherwise referenced are taken from this article.
formations that had developed independently of each other for millennia.' These references were intended to establish two points.

1. While mainstream institutions have been impacted by demands for cultural democratization, such demands have not changed the nature or continuity of Euro American cultural hegemony. Carlos Tortolero states,

   Multiculturalism as it has evolved in this country has become nothing more than a cultural charade in which Eurocentric institutions and foundations have finally determined that the cultures of people of color cannot be ignored and to correct their errors, Eurocentric institutions are being rewarded for their past neglect by receiving the bulk of funding to interpret and present the artwork of people of color. Please note one is not arguing that the mainstream museums should not present the work of people of color, but why after years of intentional neglect are they rewarded at the expense of institutions of color? Why is the question not being asked, why didn't these institutions previously present art work by people of color? Just as in the 500 year old myth of discovery, these mainstream institutions have become the new Columbus and are being rewarded for their "Discovery."\(^{27}\)

2. The cultural hegemony of art institutions is integrally related to colonial struggle and the ensuing domination by a European Renaissance culture. As a means of undercutting a Eurocentric orientation, it was important to point out that before the Conquest there existed in the Americas highly developed societies with their own world views. It was equally important to establish the colonial and militaristic nature of Renaissance culture as that of emerging capitalist societies based in primitive accumulation.\(^{28}\)

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\(^{27}\) Carlos Tortolero. Introduction to *Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings.* (Exhibition catalogue) Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 1993, not paginated.

To underscore the importance of these historical developments, I wrote, destruction and displacement of sophisticated indigenous forms of thought and expression, and the concurrent interjection of high Renaissance ideas through colonization and cultural dominance, created a hybridized Mexican culture that resulted from indigenous interpretation and transformation of the imposed Humanist tradition and transplanted cultural values, conditioning the development of many of the forms we now associate with Mexican art.

It was important to establish the interconnectedness of Mexican art as essentially evolving from European and indigenous sources, to construct an *a priori* argument that Chicano art is a hybridized cultural form. In the review, I wrote that Mexican culture is equally based in Renaissance culture and indigenous sensibilities. My purpose in referring to Renaissance influences in Mexican culture was to undermine a vision that "others" Mexican culture, and by extension Chicano art, as separate and unequal.29

I noted that this historical clash of social formations and cultures extended in a contemporary context to issues addressed in Chagoya's work. I stated,

This focus on intercultural collision is investigated by the artist in the process of exploring the ever changing nature of personal and social identity. "We are all the products of cultural change and cross-fertilization," Chagoya states in the exhibition wall text, and he articulates this sentiment through the juxtaposition and recontextualization of conflicting cultural icons, as a means of commenting on cultural hegemony and power relations.

This passage emphatically articulated a central concern of mine about the complex and hybridized nature of culture. Additionally, it

provided evidence for the way the artist reveals the ideological signifi-
cation of cultural iconography, and alluded to the parallel function of
ruling elites, as opposed to privileging or favoring a particular ruling elite
in an all-too-common nationalist fashion. By logical extension, Chagoya
alludes to modes of exploitation in primitive accumulation, colonial-
ization, and imperialism. This was stated as follows,

In this process, Chagoya explores the function and significance
of cultural images as a vehicle for extolling social values of
historically variant ruling elites—of the Mexica (Aztec), the
Spanish, and the United States—and draws analogies and
interrelationships between them. This dialectical unity and
struggle of opposites is alluded to literally and formally in
many of the works here.

Although each review demands its own particular mode of
explication, a brief description of a specific work served as a means of
detailing how Chagoya addressed a metaphoric "unity and struggle of
opposites." This struggle of opposites alludes to intercultural conflict as
well as the iconography in the work. Chagoya's work addressed the legacy
of underdevelopment in Latin America and the symbiotic relationship of
economic oppression based in colonial conquest. I described a large-scale
charcoal drawing Thesis/Antithesis (1989), in which

the well-heeled shoes of a businessman stand on and are
supported by the inverted bare feet of an unidentified person
submerged in a sea of red. The downward-pointing finger of a
gloved Mickey Mouse hand touches the finger of a bare hand
pointing in the opposite direction, an obvious reference to
Michelangelo's image of creation in the Sistine Chapel. The
dominance of colonial Renaissance culture is logically
extended to the metaculture of American commodity
production, as represented in several of Chagoya's works in
the guise of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Olive Oyl,
Superman, et al.
Interestingly, I remembered a quote I came across in the San Francisco Chronicle by Roberto Robaina, Foreign Minister of Cuba, just prior to receiving the review assignment. Robaina stated, "We are not going to meet Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse at the door as others have." This was significant not only because Chagoya uses images of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck in his work, but also because the cartoon metaphor recognized and identified the ideological nature of those particular icons as emissaries of cultural imperialism. I used the Robaina quote as the opening remark for the review. I stated about Chagoya's iconography,

> These icons appear as carriers of sublimated messages of cultural dominance, and in the act of redefining their significance Chagoya identifies them as such. Clearly, this is a political act of cultural subversion that strikes at the heart of social mystification, exposing the nature of the images as diplomats of social exploitation and oppression.

To further develop the point that Chagoya's images are identified carriers of United States metacultural dissemination and function hegemonically as a cultural equivalent to the harsh realities of U.S. foreign policy, I described another work in the exhibition, Civilization Barbarie (1993).

The artist portrays a recent historical event in El Salvador, which he describes in the wall text: "a peasant woman . . . returned home one day to find her three children, her mother and sister sitting around a table, each with its own head placed carefully on the table in front of the body, the hands placed on top 'as if each body was stroking its own head.' The assassins from the National Guard had found it hard to keep the head

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of an 18-month old baby in place, so they nailed the hands into it." Here, we find Donald Duck jubilantly promenading on the table among the victims.

My intent was to associate the cultural icons to a particular ideological function in the art work. My primary concern was to tactically interject in a popular cultural context, the art press, a chilling account that would make a direct connection, in a graphic way, between iconographic cultural phenomena of the United States (i.e., Donald Duck) and social and political policies that underpin or support the existence of U.S. cultural dominance.

Cultural conflict is a significant issue in Chagoya’s work, socially and iconographically. However, I was not content to focus strictly on a reductive and purely sociological reading of the work. I focused on the way cultural interpenetration was articulated formally in Chagoya’s work. I wrote,

Yet while these recontextualized images signify the cultural conflict of competing ideologies, they are synthesized on another level in formal terms, in references and formats that re-emerge in the contemporary discourse of the work. In several works, ancient and post-conquest codices surface in form and content, as does the retablo format that resulted from the interpenetration of diverse cultural influences, with both forms metamorphosed to address contemporary concerns that include xenophobia, transculturation, and the ideological nature of images.

The foregoing passage was critical, because it functioned to ally a formal aesthetic to the historical and social reality of Chagoya and his art. Establishing the intercultural nature of the work presented the possibility of intercultural communication.
In contemporary experience, contextualization, recycling, appropriation, and resemantization gain more and more power as a consequence of increased interaction among cultures.\textsuperscript{31}

The focus on the syncretic character of the work culturally and formally functioned to challenge the myth of universality and authenticity. This is of particular note when the culture and its forms are based in hybridity.

The struggle against Eurocentrism should not burden art with a myth of authenticity which, paradoxically, may add to the discrimination that Third World visual art suffers in the international circuits. This myth precludes its appreciation as a living response to contradictions and postcolonial hybridites, and demands instead an "originality" defined according to tradition and old cultures corresponding to a situation long since passed. More plausible is to analyze how current art in a given country or region satisfies the aesthetic, cultural, and communicative demands of the community from and for which it is made. Its response is mostly mixed, relational, appropriative—anyway, "inauthentic," and therefore more adequate to face today's reality.\textsuperscript{32}

I concluded the review,

The aesthetic and social concerns articulated by Chagoya reflect not only socio-historical genesis on a grand scale, but also the artist's personal bicultural experience in all its complexity. As such, the work addresses and makes reference to intercultural influences and the internationalization of commodity culture, and therefore synthesizes the personal concerns of the artist with the social realities of this historical epoch.

This review aimed to address a number of issues pertaining to politically motivated art and the hegemony of mainstream institutions.

These ideas were articulated through the synthesis of seemingly contradictory cultural influences in the work of Chagoya, particularly

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 39.
through the synthesizing of conflicting cultural icons and formal strategies which function to defy simplistic readings of the work. In so doing, Chagoya's work is a manifestation of the specificity of his social existence as a bicultural artist.

"Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings at Center for the Arts"

The opportunity to review Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings presented a chance to directly confront a number of issues that I had long wanted to address. The assignment provided a forum to expose a particular nationalist sentiment that I perceived as philosophically and theoretically offensive. Additionally, the review provided me the chance to apply my critical skills to a theory developed in the catalogue by one of the exhibition curators, Amalia Mesa-Bains, considered the "leading theorist of Latino identity and aesthetics in North America."33

I first became aware of Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings when I was working at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. The exhibition opened at the Mexican Fine Art Center Museum in Chicago, the originating institution. At the time, I was curious and enthused about the project. I was aware that the exhibition would travel nationally and internationally, and included a venue in San Francisco. Upon seeing the show, I had mixed feelings about both its quality and iconographic content. I felt the work reflected an overly romantic ideological orientation. I was particularly skeptical about a project that invoked a notion that there was in the United States an "Other Mexico"


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that could be spoken of as an identifiable subject. I was concerned that the 
exhibition presented the art of a people in the abstract and, in my opinion, 
from a fictional place. I was even more concerned about the artificial 
construction of the sources and meanings identified in the catalogue and 
the ramifications of those ideas for the viewing public. In the exhibition 
catalogue, Mesa-Bains stated,

*Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings* illuminates 
the art of this community through an individual and 
collective context. The exhibition is organized around the 
structure of a cultural map, whose categories of experience are 
linked together by three constituent elements, Land-Family-
Afterlife.34

I began the review with a quote from Gerardo Mosquera, "Many 
artists, critics and Latin American curators seem to be quite willing to be 
'othered' for the West."35 I felt the quote was appropriate given the 
exhibition's title and its potential to project a simplistic representation of 
Chicano art and feed a desire for the exotic. I thought the statement was 
additionally significant because the project was generated by Latinos, self-
proclaimed as the largest and most important exhibition ever organized in 
which all the components —the artists, curators, and organizers—were 
Mexican. According to the exhibition catalogue, *Art of the Other Mexico* 
"epitomizes the manner in which multiculturalism should exist in the 
U.S.," that is, as a "First Voice" approach where "people and institutions of 
color must be the leading validators, interpreters, and presenters of their 
culture."36

While I agreed that *Art of the Other Mexico* was clearly a manifestation of a range of socio-historical and aesthetic issues embodied in the development of culturally specific exhibition spaces, as well as issues of self-representation by and for the "communities" these institutions claim to represent, I felt the exhibition functioned "ironically as the visual equivalent of experiencing the diversity and complexity of Mexican culture by visiting Los Angeles' Olvera Street." \(^{37}\) Olvera Street is a historical tourist attraction that sells various objects and food and perpetuates stereotypes of Mexican identity. I believed *Art of the Other Mexico* was linked to social and aesthetic counter-cultural oppositional strategies. I wrote, "The exhibition paradoxically inverts and reifies the once politically motivated, alternative ideological, iconographic, and formal vocabularies into a static affirmation of a romantic, quasi-spiritual nationalism." I continued,

The constructed ideology in the exhibition catalogue flows directly from historically suspect generalizations, theoretical platitudes, and unitary subject categories (i.e., "nation," "Chicano community," "family," "traditional values," "exploitive Anglo values," etc.) that are assumed to have common meaning.

In order to question the curatorial premise of the exhibition, I felt it was necessary to address the ideology of the catalogue as a means of analyzing the theoretical underpinnings of the exhibition. I believed that the curatorial ideology was based in romantic notions, historically suspect generalizations, and unitary subject categories that limit a fuller

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\(^{37}\) Torres, "*Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings* at Center for the Arts." *Artweek*, vol. 26, no. 5, May 1995, p. 22. All quotes in this section not otherwise referenced are taken from this article.
understanding of the variety and complexity of work being done by Chicano artists.

Ideologically, Mesa-Bains wrote in the catalogue that the exhibition was "linked together by three constituent elements, Land-Family-Afterlife" which function as "part of a complex set of designations that are at the same time a geographic reality; a historic/political experience; a spiritual foundation and a familiar signpost."38 I wrote,

to whom these designations specifically apply is ambiguous, and it is never concretely articulated, although an attempt is made to attach these designations to a shared colonial legacy of occupation, and to an Amer-Indian world based in Meso-America. "The ancestral legacy of homeplace and landrights is founded in a Meso-American world. Chicano ancestry is born of an Amer-Indian world whose sites of memory are signposts of meaning in an indigenous landscape."39

I further contextualized this sentiment within a literary tradition identified by Renato Rosaldo in his essay "Changing Chicano Narratives."40 I stated,

The curatorial approach parallels a narrative found in early Chicano literature that establishes an Edenic mythic pattern of an idealized initial condition, a fall, and subsequent struggles to survive and thrive in the present. Allusions to history, which are significant, are characterized by sweeping statements that claim to recognize the specificity of a "complex identity," yet remain entrapped in undefined generalizations.

It was equally important for me to state,

the curatorial premises attempt to establish an idealized initial state of unitary cultural experience, without discerning the

totality of forces and relations that conditioned this historical existence. This search for a "true" identity is thus self-contradictory, based as it is in a historical non-reality.

More importantly, the curatorial ideology articulated an internalized romantic vision of an initial state of Native American existence that is itself informed by the West as one side of a binary debate. This point is articulated by Ziauddin Sardar who stated,

Columbus did not "discover" America: he globalized a world view. When the Admiral crossed the Atlantic in 1492, he took a set of ideas and reflexes about non-European people and culture with him; a perception of the which settled the fate of the "natives" he encountered. His real achievement was to transform this perception of Europe about the Other into new institutions and a global world view. . . . The whole Columbus debate, and along with it the discussion about the Western perception of the Other, is framed in a bipolar construction that promotes knowledgeable ignorance about non-Western people, traditions and cultures. Either Columbus is presented and projected as a genius and a great explorer and discoverer, or maligned as a mad destroyer of natives and indigenous cultures and a colonizer. We are deliberately trapped between a fabricated Columbus-the-Hero or a manufactured Columbus-the-Villain. Both views of Columbus stem from Europe's internal angst and anxiety about itself and are—in one case conscious, and in the other case unconscious—exercises in projecting or entrapping the Other in a world view that fueled Columbus' own passions and desires. The two constructed ways of looking at Columbus are, in fact, the two ways the West has always looked at the Other.41

A critical issue was that the curatorial team, in constructing an ideology of cultural reclamation aimed at reviving a lost past, projected a unitary theory of identity that claimed to speak for Chicanos in general, and Chicano artists in particular. Based as it was on a unitary theory of

identity, the exhibition thus distorted the nature of the artists' work. The Chicano nationalism posed in the exhibition catalogue became the basis for subsuming poly-syncretic Chicano artistic practices in what amounts to religious sentimentality that treats the various elements of a diverse social group (to the problematic extent that it can be identified as such) as though the people that comprise it were one entity sharing a unitary world view. The curators thus assumed a premise without analyzing the incongruity between the concept and the social reality. In so doing, Mesa-Bains generalized and replicated stereotypes concerning both a people and their artistic practices, which I felt needed to be addressed. My concern was informed by the thoughts of Seamus Deane, who stated,

> In an attempt to discover its true identity, a community often begins with the demolition of false stereotypes within which it has been entrapped. This is an intricate process, since the stereotypes are successful precisely because they have been interiorized. They are not merely impositions from the colonizer on the colonized. It is a matter of common knowledge that stereotypes are mutually generative of each other.\(^{42}\)

I felt it was necessary to directly dismantle the curatorial basis for the ideology expressed in the exhibition catalogue. I therefore wrote,

First, the curators appear to have internalized a colonial myth by accepting a Western notion of an idealized "Noble Savage" reconstructed as an angelic population which inhabited a genuine utopia. In this context, the nature of the Aztec empire, which expanded by conquest, is never specifically addressed, nor is the divisiveness or complexity of the then-existing indigenous cultures. Secondly, whether consciously or not, the curators identify with the agricultural bourgeoisie and mode of accumulation of the encomienda system—in which individual colonists were given religious and civil

authority over the indigenous population and allowed to extract labor and collect tribute—which existed prior to U.S. annexation of Mexican lands in 1848. This identification with a ruling elite is evidenced by statements such as: "The loss of land ownership and the resulting economic exploitation cast Mexicans into laborer's roles on farmlands they once owned." This passage reveals utopian nationalist sentiment that fails to recognize the exploitation that took place prior to annexation. A historical analysis is thus sacrificed in a futile quest to recover a mythic self-identity which cannot be realized, based as it is on a constructed ideology that on the one hand replicates stereotypes of the indigenous population as either idyllic primitives or passive victims, and on the other hand attempts to construct cultural identity based on an "imagined and remembered past" in which all Mexicans were landowners. Therefore, the only theoretical recourse is Idealism, in which "Land, Family, and Afterlife" function as central metaphors which "act as a subject and text continually reclaimed through the imagination." 

This passage was meant to delegitimize the curatorial analysis as historically inaccurate and politically reactionary. My intent was to demystify the romantic ideology inherent in the exhibition and catalogue text. I continued,

This curatorial ideology does little to shed light on the real historical and social forces that contributed to the development of contemporary Chicano art. Diverse poly-syncretic Chicano artistic practices, as if products of a unitary world view, are thus subsumed in an ideology of Chicano nationalism in what amounts to religious sentimentality that perpetuates stereotypes of both a people and their artistic practices. The result is an exoticized exhibition of uneven artistic merit that is iconographically laden with a requisite number of Virgenes de Guadalupe, chiles, sacred hearts, sombreros, calaveras, cajitas, barbed wire, etc.

I called for an analysis that looks at the diversity of Chicano cultural production as a way to combat characterizations that lead to stereotypes about Chicano art. I continued,

Ironically, the historically correct demand for a more relativist approach to standards of artistic "quality" has paradoxically resulted in artistic practice placed in the service of ideology, which allows for suspension of judgment in cases of limited craftsmanship and technique. Despite the mystification of the curatorial premises, several artists in the exhibition nevertheless utilize innovative formats and demonstrate significant skill in articulating their various artistic concerns.

On the one hand, I was eager to temper the criticism so as not to indict the individual artists in the exhibition. On the other hand, I felt it important to allude to the possibility that specific cultural iconography can degenerate into self-denigrating predictability. I concluded,

The unevenness of Art of the Other Mexico stems from a curatorial desire to construct an ideology of Chicano aesthetics that relies on myth and oversimplified generalizations which are neither theoretically sound nor historically accurate, and are inconsistent with the reality and diversity of Chicano artistic practices. This undermines any genuine effort to oppose and displace a dominant ideology, and results in a form of "self-othering" that feeds a hunger for the exotic, when the goal should be a more sophisticated level of intercultural communication and discourse.45

This review functioned as a call for a more sophisticated theoretical analysis of the development and assessment of Chicano art. In so doing, my intent was to challenge a nationalist ideology that while ostensibly concerned with combating Eurocentric aesthetic ideas, paradoxically contributes to the inversion and co-optation of historically oppositional aesthetic production.

"Patssi Valdez at the San Jose Museum of Art"

The assignment to review the Patssi Valdez exhibition provided an opportunity to address general issues and observations about Chicano art through the work of a specific Chicana artist. The work of Patssi Valdez, I felt, had been underappreciated and needed to be recognized for its historic significance and aesthetic value.

I began the review by returning to a recurring theme that has been central to my critical writing. I wrote,

*Patssi Valdez: A Room of One's Own* at the San Jose Museum of Art embodies in microcosmic form a range of ideas that have often been perceived by some as contentious or contradictory—iconographic and formal vocabularies identified as "Chicano," and bourgeois academic standards of quality. The synthesis of influences embodied in Valdez's personal artistic statements reveals the complexity of the artist's vision and existence within an intracultural social fabric derived from diverse ancestral lineages.46

These ideas alluded to the social condition of art, that an artist's work is integrally related to his or her social existence, and in Valdez's case is the product an intercultural social fabric. I also wanted to avoid the simplistic binary schismization of art by Chicanos as not informed by academic standards derived from the Renaissance. At the same time, I was concerned with making reference to and recognizing the historic validity of alternative, culturally specific iconography. At the same time, I felt it was necessary to challenge Eurocentric standards that have served to exclude

46 Torres, "Patssi Valdez at the San Jose Museum of Art." *Artweek*, vol. 26, no. 10, October 1995, p. 20. All quotes in this section not otherwise referenced are taken from this article.
the work of certain artists. In recognition of the complexity of Valdez's particular artistic practice, I stated,

Valdez's integration of various influences in her paintings demonstrates the complexity of intercultural dialogue by an artist historically marginalized in an unevenly developed aesthetic arena dominated by an excluding Eurocentric cultural power base.

The reference to marginalization was meant to connect a specific artist to the common plight of Chicano artists as the progeny of a colonial heritage, both economic and cultural.

To extend the notion of "intercultural dialogue" as informing the work, I wrote,

Interestingly, Valdez's work emerges from the unification of elements drawn from a struggle between combined social forces, both Western and indigenous Meso-American, that are themselves the consequences of cultural hybridity reflecting various artists' ongoing quest for a formal language that serves personal and/or social concerns.

I further stated,

In synthesizing influences that are often viewed as diametrically opposed, Patssi Valdez culls, formally and iconographically, from a transcultural reality that is on the one hand based on her lived social existence defined by oppression rooted in class, race and gender, and on the other hand, an auto-critique and commentary on mainstream "American" art as well as certain tendencies manifested by some other Chicano artists.

I thought it extremely important to state that the specificity of social and aesthetic experience is critical to comprehending the variety of individual artistic practices pursued by artists. A fuller view of the social and aesthetic experience of the artist is necessary in order to avoid simplistic analysis and stereotypes. I proposed,
Indeed, the contradictory aesthetic location occupied by the artist provides the source of strength for her paintings, and serves to perplex and thus inhibit an easy reading of the work as either stereotypically "Chicana/o" or conversely, as wholly informed by a tradition of European modernism, attitudes that serve to reinforce notions of the work as "derivative."

I wanted to establish that Valdez's work is the product of complex processes that do not stand static as fixed essences. Her works are informed by an interaction of tactical, relational, and cultural invention that occurs at many levels of creativity. I stated,

*A Room of One's Own* clearly demonstrates the ingenuity of the artist's appropriation, incorporation, and synthesis of historically divergent influences as a means of articulating personal ideas and sentiments. In so doing, the work ironically defies simplistic interpretation while remaining aesthetically cohesive, by parodying references drawn from diverse stylistic sources evident in the work. While there has been a tendency in many sectors of the art world to schismatize "alternative," culturally-specific iconographic languages in opposition to a Western "high art" tradition, all too often this results in vulgar modes of evaluating the validity of various forms of artistic production that do not easily fit within simplistic categories of "mainstream" or "culture-specific." This often contributes to artificially constructed lines of demarcation, which further extends feeble notions of "Latino" art, or work done by Latino artists, as exotic, fantastic, or derivative, thus invalidating the work of many artists, while contributing to over-generalization, misinterpretations and misrepresentations.47

In the review I was concerned with articulating ideas related to the pitfalls inherent in an analysis of Chicano art that continues to "exoticize" in a simplistic fashion, or, conversely, uncritically accepts the myth of the "universal" value of works based on hierarchal categories that project a

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patronizing attitude toward work that exists outside Eurocentric standards of quality.

In the context of the exhibition review, I stated,

_Patssi Valdez: A Room of One's Own_ challenges such simplistic notions by integrating a contemporary reservoir of influences that constitute the artist's social reality to create a body of work that is at once "innovative," "original" and "unique," as well as "exotic," "fantastic" and "surreal," and thus defy Eurocentric ideological connotations and associations these words conjure and reinforce, as either venerating high Modernist standards of "quality," or denigrating these works as aesthetically "othered," separate and unequal. Patssi Valdez's integration of a range of cultural resources thus dislocates and recontextualizes the intellectual significance of an ideology that has dominated aesthetics, through her utilization of formal elements, representational objects, and allusions to art historical sources to establish open-ended meanings that are at once private and social.

These ideas refer to the specific practices of Patssi Valdez, and were intended as a call for a mode of interpretation and art historical analysis that examines various works and exhibitions on a case by case basis. I felt it critical to state that the strength in Valdez's work is derived from its intercultural hybridity, and that confluence of aesthetic sources forms the site for creativity in the work. Additionally, I felt it necessary to connect the artist's work, and by extension Chicano art, to a broader aesthetic framework within an expanded definition of American art, as integral to a general world history of art. The point was to articulate that in an effort to challenge aesthetic ideas that are formed of a hegemonic continuity rooted in the Renaissance, artists and curators who have been marginalized should not in turn perpetuate isolating ideological constructions. To quote Mosquera,
Cultures should not lock themselves in isolating traditions if they want to take part in today's dynamic and offer solutions to their problems. Instead what should be done is to make traditions work within the new epoch. The problem is not preserving them but vigorously adapting them. The question is how we may also make contemporary art from our own values, sensitivities, and interests. The de-Eurocentralization in art is not about returning to purity, but about adopting postcolonial "impurity" through which we might free ourselves and express our own thoughts.48

In this regard, my review called for an analysis based on artistic specificity. I concluded the review by writing,

The exhibition Patssi Valdez: A Room of One’s Own at the San Jose Museum of Art demonstrates why these paintings fall within a unique category of artistic practice, in which the artist achieves a level of work that constitutes a unique display of spiritual and technical development in which the whole equals more than the sum of its referential or constituent parts.

CHAPTER 4

SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT

The preceding discussion of four exhibition reviews from *Artweek* addressed issues in contemporary Chicano art through specific exhibitions. My aim was to provide insights into a particular approach to writing critical exhibition reviews. The exhibition reviews were not presented as exemplary or as models for critical writing, but instead as a means of demonstrating one approach to educating the public about aesthetic and cultural issues through the medium of art criticism. The ideas presented in this thesis were not offered as authoritative, although an attempt has been made to be thoughtful and convincing. In the foregoing presentation of issues in the reviews, the concern has been with articulating the following issues.

1. The reviews defended culturally specific exhibition spaces as a means of self representation and providing a forum for cultural products not wholly informed by Euro-American institutional standards of quality of values. The value of culturally-specific exhibition spaces, addressed in the reviews "Linkage: Generation/Relation at San Jose Center for Latino Arts" and "Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings at Center for the
Arts," is that they provided marginalized artists with spaces to present their work and provided a forum for issues of self-representation.

2. In the reviews, I combated a nationalist sentiment that legitimizes Eurocentric exotic characterizations of Latino art. This sentiment thus reinforces stereotypes and aids the co-optation and inversion of aesthetic practices that challenge the hegemony and authority of mainstream art institutions. Challenging stereotypes was addressed in "Art of the Other Mexico: Sources and Meanings at Center for the Arts" by undercutting the validity of the historical premises of the exhibition catalogue, through an analysis and exposure of historically suspect generalizations.

3. The reviews aimed to problematize and establish the diversity and complexity of Latino and Chicano art, in order to avoid homogenizing and simplistic views that potentially "other" and "self-other" Latino artists. This complexity was addressed and evidenced in discussing the hybrid nature of Enrique Chagoya's work, in its synthesis of folk art and contemporary images from popular culture.

4. The reviews declared the social and cultural hybridity and syncretic nature of Latino artistic practices. This was seen as a means of challenging the simplistic schismization of Latino and non-Latino art, in favor of a more complex understanding of the work and its potential for cross-cultural communication. I stated that Patssi Valdez's work, like Chagoya's, is a synthesis of historically divergent influences and thus defies overgeneralizations and simplistic readings, both formally and iconographically. This was the significance of noting Chagoya's statement that every artist is the product of cross-fertilization.
5. The reviews aimed to connect Chicano artistic practices to contemporary art as a whole through its formal hybridity, as a means of developing intercultural communication in an inclusive and expanded redefinition of "American" art. The reviews of Chagoya's and Valdez's exhibitions made references to the integration of ancient codices and retablo formats in a contemporary art context, as well as the convergence of Western and indigenous sources.

In addressing the foregoing issues, there has been less of a concern with persuasion than with explicating the writing process and the strategies for articulating specific ideas based on particular goals. If there is an underlying theoretical logic present in the reviews, it is based in a particular line of reasoning concerned with challenged dominant cultural narratives while problematizing contemporary Chicano art from within. The double challenge of waging intellectual battles on two fronts—against Eurocentric universalizing theories and Latino nationalist ideology—necessitated a social analysis that was less concerned with discussing issues of aesthetic quality than with addressing the basis for social struggles that necessitate and condition intercultural dialogues, while articulating the social significance of particular artistic practices. From their inception, the reviews were therefore politically motivated and conditioned by social forces that set the parameters of cultural dialogue in a legacy of colonialism. This colonial legacy informed both my personal perspective on the issues as a colonial subject, as well as my motivation for critical engagement.

Long ago, I came to art and history as a means of expressing myself and understanding the world around me. I came to art criticism and
theory as a means of expressing ideas that challenge ideologies based in an investment in exploitation in a post-colonial world. Thus, my writing has been aimed at exposing and challenging Eurocentric hegemonic ideologies and nationalist sentiments that perpetuate and contribute to processes of social and environmental degradation. In so doing, my art criticism has questioned the legitimacy of conditions and ideas that perpetuate economic, cultural, biological, and environmental dysfunction. My writing has therefore been concerned with social engagement through critical dialogue in order to educate as a means for social transformation.

The issues discussed in this thesis illustrate the necessity for a sophisticated analysis of cultural production that aims at moving beyond binary opposition between "mainstream" and "culturally specific." This analysis thus forms a vehicle for articulating identity through the specific practices and social existences of diverse individuals. In so doing, my goal is to achieve a countercultural discourse that in its reaction to and appropriation of a range of sources and ideas avoids tendencies that "other" and in some cases "self-other" particular cultural practices.

A central thought that has formed much of the discussion in this thesis is that by avoiding simplistic definitions of cultural products and the social forces that inform them, critical discourse can advance an appraisal that is better equipped to reveal the meaning and significance of diverse cultural manifestations. I am therefore advocating an analysis that breaks away from discourses that benefit from and feed on constructions of the exotic, in favor of more sophisticated intercultural dialogue. To quote Mosquera,
Careful account should be taken of how artwork functions in its context, what values are recognized there, what sensibility it satisfies, what perspective it opens, what it contributes. Only after such a thorough understanding would we recognize the messages of interest that art can communicate to the viewer addressed by the exhibitions, and how it can contribute towards a general enrichment. Given that it has been demonstrated the role of the viewer is fundamental in art and literature, this does not mean that one only sees one’s self and one’s own circumstance, but also that reception is active and therefore capable of expanding.

The fundamental problem for exhibitions and texts with an intercultural meaning is communication. On the one hand to inform and contextualize; and on the other to orientate towards what interests new receivers. As mediators they must accept compromise, but need to make an effort to avoid centrisms and cliched expectations. It is easy to say it, but in practice we are far from possessing exemplary solutions.49

Discussion regarding the ability of art objects to communicate across cultures should consider that in any number of environments people are engaged in practices concerned with the creation of material culture. And whether one chooses to call those symbolic practices "art" (based on Eurocentric standards and definitions), human beings across cultures are nevertheless engaged in acts of symbolic representation. This phenomenon of artistic production in various cultural environments should be viewed as a key by which to find points of confluence based in the dialectics between ideas, labor processes, and the inherent qualities of the materials transformed. The specificity of diverse artistic practices thus forms a common ground of artistic production. It is in the specificity of the objects, based in a general condition of artistic practice as the interaction of bodies in particular environments, that we may view the presence of the

work as complex microcosms of sources, influences, and human experiences in nature. This understanding can thus contribute to a view of cultural production based in the common condition of artistic practice, and will perhaps lead to analytical points of conjuncture by which to establish the interdependent nature of individuals in contemporary society through critical theory and art education.

The value of the exhibition reviews lies in their articulation of issues and ideas to educate the public in an expanded public forum that exists outside of the confines and constraints of the classroom. The exhibition reviews in the popular art press provide an alternate venue for the presentation of ideas for diverse audiences not exclusively defined by an academic setting. The significance of public access to the dialogue is crucial for the dissemination of the ideas, particularly since the artistic practices and discourses discussed in this thesis have had such limited public exposure. The availability of the ideas is critical if the artists, and the value of their works, are to be recognized. The establishment of the validity of the work is crucial to the integration of Latino and Chicano artists into discussion of contemporary art as a whole. This integration is critical if these artists are to avoid continued marginalization. The validation of the work and the issues addressed in the reviews is necessary for the legitimation of Latino cultural practices. The exhibition reviews provide one way of educating the public to the value and significance of art done by Chicanos. This process of public education through the popular art press thus contributes to an inclusive redefinition of contemporary American art.
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